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Former spy alive, well in Ridgefield

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RIDGEFIELD — If James Bond were real, he might have rubbed shoulders with John Norman of Cooper Hill Road.

For Norman, who has made a career in the field of counterintelligence and espionage, the day-to-day work of being a spy is far less glamorous than the life of Ian Fleming's famous fictional Agent 007. But it is still an exciting career.

Norman is still filled with wonder when he looks back on his years with the Office of Strategic Services. The OSS was the forerunner of today's Central Intelligence Agency.

In his years as an active intelligence officer, Norman interviewed some of history's prominent people, including the well-known novelist and anti-Nazi exile Thomas Mann and Don Luigi Sturzo, founder of Italy's Christian Democratic Party.

In an effort to learn more about Hitler, Norman interviewed people who knew the Nazi dictator well. He also questioned Rondolfo Pacciardi, leader of Italy's Garibaldi Brigade who went on to become Defense Minister of Italy.

Norman's most recent experience was interviewing a Russian defector from the KGB.

Norman readily admits that he is a name dropper, but said he can't help it.

"I'm proud I've met all these people," he said. "If it weren't for some of the evidence they've given me, I could never have made such a contribution to the CIA."

He he will not divulge his age, because it approaches retirement, but boyish enthusiasm shines in his eyes and smile.

"In some ways I've never grown up. I'm still curious, still a hero worshipper," he said.

Norman is basically an academician who more or less fell into the role of a spy. With degrees from Syracuse University and Clark University, Norman became a teacher of history and political science at Syracuse after completing his master's and doctoral degrees. He wrote his thesis on Franco-Italian relations and fascist propaganda.

His research papers were read by a top official in the OSS, who asked Norman to interview one of Hitler's cohorts. "They wanted somebody who knew what questions to ask, someone trained in history and political science. It was a major help to the war effort to know more about Hitler."

Norman was asked to interview Herman Rauschning, president of the Danzig Senate. Rauschning predicted the non-agression pact between Hilter and Josef Stalin.

The information Norman learned was so helpful that he was called on again and again. "Many of my reports went directly to the Secretary of State and Joint Chiefs of Staff," said Norman.

It became Norman's job to debrief refugees from Nazism and fascism, many of them renowned authors and scholars who had escaped to the United States during World War II. He reported directly to the OSS director, Major General William "Wild Bill" Donovan.

The work had little of the glitter and excitement depicted in James Bond movies, which Norman finds "thoroughly entertaining."

"These foreign leaders were extremely knowledgeable about important individuals in their countries' governments and militaries. All this was grist for the intelligence mill," said Norman.

Reading foreign newspapers to detect shifts in politics and interviewing refugees for helpful information was sometimes "plodding, tedious work," Norman said. "But it was exciting to be part of the intelligence community."

Some of his work came far closer to the James Bond role, Norman said. He can only discuss declassified material, however.

"I really can't go into detail about some of the espionage work. There are still spies around and security and caution are deeply ingrained," he said.

Although the life of a spy is over for Norman, he is still breaking ground in his field. He teaches one of the country's few courses on intelligence and espionage, at Pace University.

"I was among the pioneers to introduce this course into a college curriculum nearly 10 years ago," said Norman.

Since there are very few such courses, Norman was recently invited to visit the CIA and interview some of its top officials and operatives. He also had a chance to meet a Soviet defector, he said.

"It was very reassuring to find they (the KGB) think of us as sophisticated and dangerous," said Norman.

Norman is philosophical about people who think the CIA is inept.

"Every time there's a slip-up, and slip-ups are normal, it makes the news," he said. "But if they have some huge success, they can't very well brag about it because it could endanger a covert operation. There is a built-in disadvantage in public relations."

Norman said he was gratified to find the CIA appreciates his efforts to teach students about espionage work. "They are bending over to help me in any way they can," he said.

Although he sometimes misses the excitement of active participation in intelligence work, Norman is busy writing books, articles and teaching his classes. He has also been active in local politics and says he enjoys the social qualities of the Ridgefield Democratic Town Committee.

His classes on espionage are sellouts. "There are a lot of people with the James Bond syndrome," he said. "I guess I am one of them."

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